

At the beginning of *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science* (2004), Ronald Thomas calls the detective genre a “diversion from some historical reality”. Thomas situates this idea in the first Sherlock Holmes story, when Holmes announces that he both takes cocaine and created the role of “the detective” because he ‘abhor[s] the dull routine of existence’ (1). This article, however, is tied to that historical reality which Thomas argues the detective escapes, looking to a figure who, though often sidelined in history, is, in fact, emblematic of that “dull routine of existence” that so offends Sherlock Holmes: the lower-middle-class clerk. For the late-Victorian clerk, suffocating in an office increasingly pressured by mechanisation, female competition, and a dwindling status, detective fiction offered an opportunity for exciting and intellectually stimulating escapism. Hence, by the “golden age” of detective fiction, clerical workers were at the centre of a middlebrow readership that had helped to popularise the genre. At the same time, within the detective fiction which they so enjoyed, this same clerk was represented in a negative light, as a reflection of the tensions between the middle classes (the “bourgeoisie” who Walter Benjamin called “obsess[ed] with law and order”) and the lower middle classes (McCaw 20). As a result, the clerk-character was not, for instance, a great Holmesian mastermind, nor even a cunning and celebrated criminal; instead, he was repeatedly depicted as being either a low-level criminal, bereft of ingenuity, or signalled as such in order to provide a “red herring” for the reader. In both of these instances, the clerk is clearly signposted as participating (actually or potentially) in opportunistic and unambitious white-collar crime – a figure inspiring little interest in a world where murder dominates.

This article focuses on the detective fiction of Agatha Christie, and suggests that while, at first, she employs the clerk-nobody as a “nobody” in a manner that reflects a century of negativity, she later starts to play with the notion of an anonymous clerk and challenges depictions of innocuousness. Thus, the clerk’s status begins to symbolise a more potent form of subversion. This article charts the complex and changing representations of clerks within Christie’s works and examines three specific identities: the nonentity, the common swindler, and the mastermind. The first two of these characterisations feed into widespread contemporaneous social commentaries demonstrating the broader dismissal of the lower middle classes:¹ the clerk is neither as brilliant nor divisive as a murderer, nor as morally secure

as an innocent bystander. In fact, he fits ironically into the same category of “(no)body” as the victim within the conventions of the genre – that is, to be little-known and thus detached emotionally from the reader. The final trope anticipates something more complicated as Christie begins to consider the danger of the predatory nature of the figure lost in the urban crowd.

As a piece of literary history, then, this article treads carefully between the appropriation of the detective genre as a mere socio-historical source, an accusation that Gill Plain has levelled (7), and a straight-forward textual close-reading. Instead, this article aims to examine the place of the clerk within Agatha Christie’s work, drawing parallels with other middlebrow writers, while exploring the potential for subverting those typical forms explicitly within detective fiction. In sum, this article looks at how the clerical “nobody” is constructed in a genre that relies on the “body” to define itself. This article, following Alison Light’s excellent discussion of middlebrow fiction (1991), places Christie’s works at the centre of an emergent interest not only in terms of the ongoing debate between the brows, but also a broader exploration of an under-researched middlebrow readership: those whom John Carey and Jonathan Wild have identified as the “clerkly” class (Carey, 1992; Wild, 2006). By beginning to discuss the ways in which clerks are represented in detective fiction, it also opens up the possibility for examining the response of clerical readers to their literary reflections.

Agatha Christie’s Clerks

The dubious status of detective fiction within the literary establishment needs no reiteration here (although for a comprehensive overview see Keith Snell’s recent article (21-50)), and as a result, the critical exploration of the vast array of works by contemporary and historical detective writers has been somewhat muted. Notably, within this critical field, the emphasis has remained on the boundaries of defining terms such as “detective” and “crime”, and the interplay with other genres – particularly the thriller, the *noir* tradition, and American counterparts. Until recently, little changed from Earl Bargainnier pointing out in *The Gentle Art of Murder* (1980), that critics of the genre spend too much time outlining the rules and

assessing how well authors pay attention to them, and too little time examining the literature (1-3). Encouragingly, writers such as Christie have been recently reformed through the growing field of middlebrow study – see, for example, Melissa Schaub’s recent book on *Middlebrow Feminism in Classic British Detective Fiction* (2013). Where the analysis of these detective fictions becomes most interesting, arguably, is in the close reading of textual practices and the representations of specific features; it is along these lines that this article is formed.

The clerical class includes the many thousands of clerks, drapers, shop assistants, and varied other office, administrative, and commercial workers who were crucial to the development of a new readership at the beginning of the twentieth century.² Commonly subsumed into the figure of “the clerk,” this class is represented more generally in popular culture as an anonymised, faceless, grey-suited blur in the crowd – see, for instance, George and Weedon Grossmith’s “Nobody” (1892), P. G. Wodehouse’s “Psmith” (1910), or former clerk T. S. Eliot’s “undone” crowds “flow[ing] over London Bridge” (63). For those who see Agatha Christie’s natural *metier* as the upper-middle classes, an exploration of clerkly identities within her fiction seems unsubstantiated. And yet, and as Light has already observed, the English country-house – and its occupants – were not, as is commonly assumed, the main focus of Christie’s writing. Hercule Poirot, the metropole, frequently encounters members of the 200-250,000-strong clerical class drawn to the capital by 1911 (Heller 1). It is predominantly within the novels featuring the great Belgian that we see the formation of a number of striking clerks.³

It is within Christie’s clerical representations that we can identify several interlinked facets: that there is repetition of implied characteristics when discussing clerks; that these correspond to the interplay between impressions of clerks in the media and the furthering of stereotypes within fiction; which, in turn, contribute to wider stigmatisation of the lower middle classes. Her clerical characters, then, become what Peter Widdowson identifies as “representative images” – as a culmination of what Christie thinks clerks ought to be, rather than as a clerk is or was (11). Christie was also not alone in constructing these character boundaries; she was, in fact, reliant on a series of caricatures, satirical images, and stereotypes that had pervaded literary (and non-literary) references for the previous fifty years.⁴

Thus, in surveying the novels featuring Hercule Poirot there are set ways in which Christie's clerks take form. The first is as a nonentity: there are a number of clerks described in Christie's fiction that are little more embroidered than her servants – see, for instance, the following line from *The Mystery of the Blue Train* (1928): “In [the compartment] was a pompous-looking official personage, and with him a nondescript being who appeared to be a clerk” (75). The “nondescript being”, despite effort to place him as such, receives no further mention; the conversation held in the small railway compartment is between the “official personage” and Poirot only. This more generalised view of the clerk as a “nobody” is reflective of the wider cultural repertoire; Christie is repeating the types of insult directed at clerks across the previous century, just as when she remarks ironically in *Five Little Pigs* (1942) that, “Caroline Crale [...] could have recognised quality in a bank clerk or an insurance agent!” (35).

Despite dismissing the clerk figure, Christie does not offer him the same level of protection within the plotline as the two-dimensional servant character. Plain discusses the contempt levelled at butlers within the genre, yet she also argues that the “illegitimacy of his class position ironically guarantees his unimpeachability in the bourgeois world” (12). The butler, then, never “did it”, but no one is sure of the clerk. Instead, while the same contempt is directed at the clerk – an imposter to the middle classes – he is not technically an outsider in the same way, and thus he remains a valid suspect. Christie leans furthest towards stereotyping the lower middle classes when this “insider-intruder” status heightens the desire for the bourgeoisie – normally represented as a family – to deflect tension at a potential suspect. This typing is particularly apparent in *After the Funeral* (1953) – more on which in a moment.

The representation of the clerk as nondescript denotes his position within contemporaneous society more widely – note, the time span of these two novels (1928 and 1942) and how little the commentary has changed. They fit what Christopher Breward has described as the “delineation of the clerk as an ‘everyman’, depressingly uniform in his identity and habits” (112). Breward cites Richard Whiteing's 1888 novel, *The Island, or an Adventure of a Person of Quality* as an early marker of this mentality:

And, for background, the nondescript thousands in black and brown and russet and every neutral hue, with the sun over all, and between the sun and the thousands the London mist (Breward, 110).

Whiteing sets up the type of anonymity that has continued into contemporary representations of suited nondescripts; for instance, Mr Banks in *Mary Poppins*, *Reginald Perrin* (or, Reggie, in the 2009 BBC remake), the characters in *The Office*, Chandler Bing in American sitcom *Friends*. These characters remain typical of what the late-nineteenth century clerk-authors called the “plight of the clerk;” stuck in a detestable job, insecure, and emasculated.

The second method of representation in Christie’s works starts to pick out these individual clerks from within the mass. This corresponds with what Lisa Evans and Ian Fraser have identified as the changing impression of office workers; that they were becoming less often seen as “boring” and more likely portrayed as “corrupt[...], self-interest[ed] and dishonest[...].” (966). This clerk corresponds with the general impression created by the popular press that a proximity to money was a corrupting force. In the press, it is consequently the clerk’s legacy, rather than that of the corrupt auditor or company director, to be found in the news section.⁵ A search of the term “clerk” in the Archives of the *Financial Times* brings up the following titles as a sample: “Embezzlement by a Stockbroker’s Clerk”, “Sentence on a Bank Clerk”, “Charge Against a Stockbroker and a Clerk”, and “A Missing Bank Clerk” (2; 2; 3; 2). As Katherine Unterman argues, the legal term “embezzlement” is, unlike “theft”, based on the more serious breach of responsibility that takes place (157). And yet, if the image of the conniving clerk might have stirred up a sense of danger or illegality, within Christie’s work these acts of petty crime are placed within a hierarchy of much more explicitly “evil” acts. Simply put, theft is not a threat when compared with murder. Her clerk characters are often haunted by this natural predilection towards financial lust; a fact that makes them both highly prized as potential suspects but fundamentally unoriginal as criminals. There is not the same admiration expressed towards their crimes as there is for characters like Countess Vera Rossakoff, who are at the top of their game.

Let us take, for example, James Ryder, of *Death in the Clouds* (1935). In her usual manner, Christie establishes the rudiments of a locked-door crime: eleven passengers (including one detective) are sharing a plane carriage when one dies – the victim is notorious and much-hated moneylender, Madame Giselle. On finding her “little black book” of clients, Hercule Poirot and his assorted medley of officials attempt to break the code by which Madame Giselle kept her customers’ identities secret. On profiling the passengers in order to establish these identities, we read the following description:

‘XVB 724 is very ambiguous. English. Embezzlement.’

‘Not very helpful,’ agreed Poirot. ‘Who embezzles? A solicitor? A bank clerk? Anyone of a position of trust in a commercial firm. Hardly an author, a dentist or a doctor. Mr James Ryder is the only representative of commerce. He may have embezzled money, he may have borrowed from Giselle to enable his theft to remain undetected’ (Christie, *Death in the Clouds* 88).

Poirot’s indictment of those in “position[s] of trust” displays his characteristic suspicion, but it also demonstrates the cultural impression of the media reports that so carefully align clerks with petty fraud. A dentist or doctor could embezzle money from their practices, they have a proximity to financial dealings, but they also have a professional, middle-class status. James Ryder may well have embezzled money – in fact, Poirot suggests, it is a natural assumption that he would do so (and, indeed, he has) – but as a motive for murder it is inherently uninteresting. It is ironic, of course, that the greater crime (the murder itself) is committed by the dentist – just as in five of Christie’s novels it is a doctor who is the murderer.⁶ Many of Christie’s novels discuss the modern need/desire for money and make much of it as a potential motive, but the type of petty theft associated with the clerk is rarely the reason for murder. Another example of the inherent corruption of the clerk within *Death in the Clouds* demonstrates this. Jules Perrot, the clerk in the office of Universal Airlines accepts five thousand francs from a wealthy American passenger in exchange for lying to Madame Giselle about the availability of seats on an earlier flight. Poirot can easily intimidate Perrot (whose eyes are “shifting”) by reinforcing the idea that in a murder case it is “better to make a clear

breast” of minor foibles (94). Poirot demonstrates that the clerk can only be complicit in a murder in one sense; that of an unconscious accomplice motivated by money. Christie uses financial gain as a primary motivator for suspicion, to create an environment complicated by greed and mistrust, particularly within a family unit, rather than as a motive. In those instances where money is a motive, it is in the guise of a substantial inheritance, and generally involves a degree of carefully planned impersonation, rather than mere opportunity.⁷

Another example of mild corruption takes place within *After the Funeral*. Mr Entwhistle, shrewd observer of human life, quickly notes the undesirability of George Crossfield, just as Poirot immediately suspects James Ryder. George is part of the family but placed initially at a distance from the more “respectable” members because of his parentage, despite being the only remaining male heir. His father was a “dubious sort of fellow” who “called himself a ‘stockbroker’” while George himself is “in a solicitor’s office – not a very reputable firm” (Christie, *After the Funeral* 12). The blurred usage of “in a solicitor’s office” suggests that George is not, in fact, a solicitor, but is rather some form of clerk and in a station below someone of his family connections. Christie is here employing the same type of euphemistic clouding as Virginia Woolf in *Night and Day* (1919); Woolf’s protagonist Ralph Denham is a solicitor’s clerk but his bourgeois friend Katherine, granddaughter of a great Victorian poet, obscures his job within subtle title-alterations.

Established within the first chapter, then, as a “bad type”, George’s behaviour mirrors that of the fraudulent clerk so discussed in the press. Early on, his motive for murder is clear: “Truth is, I’ve not been very lucky with my investments lately. I took a bit of a risk and it didn’t come off. More or less cleaned me out” (41). Entwhistle assumes, at this point, that George has speculated with not only his own money but that of his clients and thus the breach of that “position of trust” reoccurs. Within the same interview, Entwhistle as narrator also ponders on the suitability of George as an heir:

George was not an Abernethie, but he was the only male of the younger generation. He was the natural successor to Mortimer. Richard Abernethie had sent for George, had had him staying in the house for some days. It seemed probable that at the end of the

visit the older man had not found George satisfactory. Had he felt instinctively, as Mr Entwistle felt, that George was not straight? George's father, so the family had thought, had been a poor choice on Laura's part. A stockbroker who had had other rather mysterious activities. George took after his father rather than after the Abernethies (41).

Here we witness Christie at her most caricaturing; George is a clerk and he "was not an Abernethie". His mother was, and he could have been the heir that his great-uncle sought, but for the corruption of his stockbroker father and the inappropriateness of his own career. George is symbolic of many genre traits; that the ideal suspect is an "outsider" – in this case, from within the family by blood but disassociated by "character" and "corruptive influence" – and that money is a motivating factor. And yet, there is a strong counterforce that continues to be asserted within the text; suspects who steal small amounts cannot therefore be made of the "right stuff" to commit murder. In fact, George is a perfect parallel for the "actual" murderer, who, despite being a middle-aged spinster, is more apt murderer material than a dodgy clerk.

The final interpretation of the clerk in Christie's works involves a dissection of the language directed at clerkly types – particularly the terms "nondescript" and "nonentity". Here we start to open up the definition of clerk and disentangle from this universal title other lower-middle-class figures such as the chemist, the shop assistant, the typist, and the pupil-teacher. The nondescriptness favoured by Christie in describing clerk-characters starts to be applied to other figures, and it is within this dissemination that we see the danger associated with modern anonymity. Put simply, if we are not scared of Christie's clerks because we see them as petty thieves only, we start to fear those who can co-opt the clerk's ability to merge into the background. This type of character is played upon particularly in *After the Funeral* in dangerously "explosive" Gregory Banks,⁸ who is described as "nondescript in appearance – and yet, in some way, not nondescript" by our clerk George Crossfield. Gregory has what Poirot calls a "punishment complex" but Susan, his wife, explains it in different terms:

Greg has never had a *chance*. That's why I wanted Uncle Richard's money so badly [...] I knew Greg had got to set up for himself. He had got to feel he was *someone* – not just a chemist's assistant, being pushed around. Everything will be different now. He will have his own laboratory (171-2).

Gregory's ailment, it would seem, is the predicament of the lower-middle-class antihero. Across literature we see comparable examples: from H. G. Wells's Mr Polly, who tires of being a shopkeeper; Arnold Bennett's Richard Larch who tries, in vain, to become a great author in order to escape clerical life; and Shan Bullock's clerk Robert Thorne who emigrates to New Zealand in an attempt to "be a man" (283). Gregory is a menacing presence within the novel; set up as the perfect red herring for a violent and shocking murder. Yet, whilst he is a "queer fish" and has spent time in a sanatorium for attempting to poison a customer, Gregory's neurosis comes from his social consciousness: "I dare say I hadn't the right accent – I don't wear my clothes the right way" (168-9). Gregory, then, is echoic of another socially conscious literary clerk – T. S. Eliot's J. Alfred Prufrock.

Christie accuses Gregory of being little more than unsatisfied with his lot; and yet, his grandiose belief that he deserves a greater chance assumes social psychosis. She takes the misplaced snobbery that Eliot, like the Grossmiths, gently laughs at, and makes it potentially dangerous. In doing so, Christie undoes the work of middlebrow writers such as Bennett, Bullock, and Wells, who attempted to give humanity and depth to their clerks, in returning to the late-Victorian caricature. This new caricature is darker than formerly; he is not the lovably pompous Charles Pooter, but the maniacally insane chemist's assistant, powerful in his proximity to corruptible drugs.

If it is in characters like Gregory that we see the danger of suppressing the aspirant lower middle classes, Christie also alludes to the deliberate subversion created by those who channel their traits of invisibility and mundaneness. Christie suggests that true criminal masterminds can *achieve* non-descript-ness – and that, by doing so, they have perfected the greatest disguise. Whilst being dismissed as a clerk by those seeking a criminal, the mundane mastermind can hide in plain view. It is in characters like Mr Brown (in Tommy and Tuppence's *The Secret*

Adversary (1922)) and Number Four, of *The Big Four* (1927) (“he has nondescript eyes, nondescript ears, and a perfect set of false teeth”, as Poirot surmises (Christie, *Big Four* 16-17)), that we see the full and terrifying potential of a mundane and menacing type. Christie takes the attributes of the clerk and repositions the ability to be overlooked as a desirable characteristic of the super-criminal. Mr Brown and Number Four are feared because they are, in fact, invisible; it is no coincidence that they frequently disguise themselves as lower-class nonentities: a prison guard, a butcher’s delivery boy. In a similar vein, the famous jewel thief and murderer in *The Mystery of the Blue Train* is a personal secretary to a millionaire; the greatest disguise is as someone who could conceivably steal small quantities of money and so is unsuspected as a renowned international mastermind.

If anonymity and nondescriptness can culminate in the most unnerving of criminals, it is also a strategy applied by those who are fighting corruption. Secret Service types, such as Albert Chapman, in *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* (1940) are “useful because [they] are an insignificant sort [...] whose face isn’t easily remembered” (106). Likewise, Mr Goby, a recurrent character in Christie’s later works (*Third Girl* (1966), *Elephants Can Remember* (1972), *Hallowe’en Party* (1969), *The Mystery of the Blue Train* (1928) and *After the Funeral* (1953)) – is menacing for criminals because he has successfully made use of anonymity to become an informer. Christie describes him as “a small shrunken little man, so nondescript as to be practically non-existent” (*Third Girl* 42). Not only is she playing upon the trait of clerkly invisibility but the reiteration of both “small” and “little” encourages associations with a thread of clerical stereotype that had been in evidence for over a century.⁹ In “The Case of the City Clerk” (1934), Christie’s Mr Roberts is described as “a small, sturdily built man of forty-five, with wistful, puzzled, timid eyes”, and is referred to three times as a “little clerk” (68). These clerkly traits, which have rendered their owners inconsequential by society are, in fact, the very characteristics which offer anonymity to those who seek it – for good or ill.

The ABC Murders (1936)

Christie's depictions of the lower middle classes are complicated, and thus made more interesting, by her varied approach to the three strands identified above. For instance, her clerks do not really follow a neat trajectory: there are not periods of classifying the clerk as a "nobody", followed by a progression into a criminal clerk, who later develops an evil and malign anonymity. Instead, her work is a mixture of representative forms; there can only be the loosest of historical or contextual patterns placed alongside her novels when discussing the place of the clerk. It is for this reason that this article concludes by examining *The ABC Murders* (1936); a novel that charts Christie's interest in the clerk subject and which, it seems, plays with the varying types, impressions, and potential for the clerk himself. Most fascinating of all, it features three very different clerks – the largest number within any Christie novel – two of whom are central to the plot.

The first clerk to whom the reader is formally introduced¹⁰ is Mr James Partridge, the last person to see the first victim, Mrs Ascher, alive:

Mr Partridge was a small man, a bank clerk by profession. He wore pince-nez, was very dry and spare-looking and extremely precise in all his utterances. He lived in a small house as neat and trim as himself (Christie, *ABC Murders* 46).

We might compare Mr Partridge to Norman Collins's "smooth, precise little men wearing stiff collars and horn-rimmed spectacles" (13) in *London Belongs to Me* (1945); he is an early precursor to David Perry and Jerry Croft's bank manager Captain Mainwaring in *Dad's Army* (1968-1977) or Captain Darling from Richard Curtis and Ben Elton's *Blackadder Goes Forth* (1989). He is, in fact, so caricatured a type as to fulfil all critics of Christie's ability to define characters. Mr Partridge even owns an ABC Railway Guide; the only clue in the murder, fuelling the creation of a stereotype – the suburban, commuting clerical classes must naturally be reliant on a railway timetable. Poirot prefers him as a potential suspect to the next witness whom he and Hastings interview – a "big clumsy giant of a man with a broad face and suspicious eyes" (48) – Mr Albert Riddell. Riddell is agitated, uncooperative, and bordering on violent, but Poirot prefers the clerical pomposity of Partridge because it could underscore the

type of “conceit and self-confidence” that he views as the likely psyche of their murderer (53). Again, as in *After the Funeral*, we hear that the clerical experience could furnish a potential murderer with a psychological motive: “I see him growing up with an inward sense of inferiority – warring with a sense of injustice... I see that inner urge – to assert himself – to focus attention on himself ever becoming stronger, and events, circumstances – crashing it down – heaping, perhaps, more humiliations on him” (52). This description is, in fact, echoic of Eliot’s clerkly Prufrock, who laments the ease with which higher-class women emasculate him because of his social awkwardness. It is, in fact, a character very much like Pritchard who “goes at once to the police – pushes himself to the fore – enjoys his position” and carries out the murder – but he is not a clerk (53). The reader soon knows that Partridge can have nothing to do with the case because, according to the rules of the genre, he soon disappears from the narrative.

If we lose one clerk after a brief encounter, a second soon steps into his place. The second murder, of Betty Barnard, leads to the introduction of Donald Fraser, clerk. The first that the reader hears of Fraser does not chime with the expectation of a clerical character – he is, for instance, described by Betty’s waitress colleague as: “Good looking – oh, very good looking, and always so nicely dressed” (66). Betty’s sister, Megan, offers a more nuanced sketch, drawing the reader back to the Prufrockian type; in her eyes, he is “a very quiet person – a bottled-up person” with a “jealous nature” (75). Megan further describes him as “very steady and hard-working” (69), with the potential to be a “good husband”, whilst later informing Poirot of a fight he had with Betty in which “[he] was so violent that Betty was frightened” (71). Fraser is established as the ideal suspect; a fact that the real murderer depends on for his smoke-screen effect, and a crucial narrative device for Christie’s typical misdirection. Christie’s own physical description of Fraser shows a considerable degree of uncertainty; he is a clerk who defies aspects of the type and thus seems unsurely located: “He was a well-made, fine-looking young fellow, standing close on six foot, not good looking, but with a pleasant, freckled face, high cheek-bones and flaming red hair” (78). Fraser is both “fine-looking” but “not good looking”, his height seems to flaunt the expectations of a short clerk, and his “flaming red hair” do little to guarantee him any anonymity. His manner “quite quiet and self-

controlled”, even in the throes of grief alters rapidly once Poirot begins cross-examining him: “Suddenly the automaton came to life. ‘What the devil do you mean?’ His face then, menacing, convulsed by sudden passion, made me understand that a girl might well be afraid of rousing his anger” (74). Christie’s use of “automaton” offers a glimpse beneath the surface of the clerical machine: taking a widely held view of clerical work as a bureaucratic assembly line, with automatons at the helm, she inverts the characteristic “meticulous” “caution” that Eliot injects his clerks with, and unleashes an animalistic emotion.¹¹ As Robert Barnard suggests, Christie shows us the “murderous glint in the eye of the self-effacing bank clerk” (36); she brings the potential of murder to the suburban environment, and in doing so, she titillates a readership who are excited at their own capacity for bloodlust. Dominic Sandbrook cites an article in the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1888 that remarks: “Scratch John Bull and you find the ancient Briton who revels in blood, and devours the details of a hanging. If you doubt it, ask the clerks at Mr. Smith’s bookstalls [...]” (e-pub). Christie’s clerk is, then, a shocking reminder of her central premise that it is not “homicidal maniacs” that commit murder but ordinary people (70). Donald Fraser also demonstrates Christie’s interest (so carefully explored through her most famous detectives – Poirot and Miss Marple) in the psychology of murder.

Donald’s character is given greater scrutiny once he becomes part of the conference of family and friends connected to the victims that Poirot recruits in order to catch the killer. His “inarticulateness” is commented upon, as is his habit of twisting his hands together “nervously” (128). In one interview with Poirot and Hastings he has a “queer air of grateful obedience” before proceeding to tell them of a recurring dream in which he repeats the actions of the killer but instead strangles his murdered fiancée’s sister, Megan (129). While we hear not of Poirot’s response – the crucial fourth letter arriving in the post – the dream sequence and the accompanying discomfort of Donald further the reader’s fears about his sanity. It also signifies a Freudian interpretation of the subconscious, which is taken so seriously by the young clerk that he is left in doubt about his own actions: “What does it mean? I – I didn’t kill her, did I?” (130). Christie makes very clear parallels between Donald’s behaviour and that of another clerkly type: Alexander Bonaparte Cust – both are weak, and self-doubting, and much of this neurosis appears to be attributed to their class status. The murderer, the eminently middle-class

Franklin Clarke, is the antithesis of these lower-middle-class types; he has “the resolute competent manner of a man accustomed to meeting with emergencies” (92).

Stylistically unusual, *The ABC Murders* features several chapters set out as “Not [being] from Captain Hastings’ Personal Narrative”. These chapters are narrated in omniscience and focus on the behaviour of Mr Alexander Bonaparte Cust (the first character introduced outside of Poirot and Hastings in the novel); a conspicuous presence following a letter from a potential murderer, signed ABC. He is, in this first chapter (a mere two paragraphs long) a decidedly lower-middle-class figure, as constructed through the careful description of his “shabby bedroom”, his “well-worn overcoat”, “his cheap cigarettes”, and an allusion to his possession of a typewriter. But he is also threatening; enough coincides with the murderous letter to allude to a potential “person of suspicion” (17). Alexander Cust is our classic red herring; he is, in fact, a deliberately chosen scapegoat, a former-clerk and war veteran (akin to Virginia Woolf’s tragic Septimus Smith in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925)), who suffers from blackouts and headaches and, in need of work, takes on a commission as a travelling salesman of silk stockings. His “employer” (the murderer) sends him potential sales addresses in the towns where each murder will take place, making his silk stockings a presence at each crime scene. The murderer, however, becomes frustrated by his scapegoat because of a misunderstanding of one crucial element: the fact that Mr Cust is a nonentity. As a result, Cust is not recognised, noticed, or even observed at any of the crime scenes for some time. Cust becomes both an object of fear for the reader as an anonymous but reoccurring bystander, but also a thwarted suspect for the murderer:

Mr Cust remained with his paper.

He read and reread...

People passed to and fro in front of him.

Most of them were talking of the murder [...]

Mr Cust folded up the paper very neatly and laid it on the seat. Then he rose and walked sedately along towards the town.

Girls passed him, girls in white and pink and blue, in summery frocks and pyjamas and shorts.

They laughed and giggled. Their eyes appraised the men they passed.

Not once did their eyes linger for a second on Mr Cust...

He sat down at a little table and ordered tea and Devonshire cream... (107)

This passage encroaches on formal modernist styles – not least in the stream-of-consciousness form, the representation of Cust's post-war neurosis, and the Prufrockian girls passing "to and fro" – but it also demonstrates clearly the invisibility of the clerical travelling salesman. Like Eliot's Prufrock, Cust is outside of sexuality; as a middle-aged "neat" and "sedate" figure, he is lost to the gaze of youth and femininity. It is this quality that eventually puts Cust in the dock, as a psychopath presumably enraged by *not being noticed*. The moment at which Cust hands himself over to the police sees another typically Prufrockian scene:

Foot in front of foot... what an odd thing walking was...

Foot in front of foot – ridiculous

Highly ridiculous...

But man was a ridiculous animal anyway...

And he, Alexander Bonaparte Cust, was particularly ridiculous...

He always had been...

People had always laughed at him...(184)¹²

The reader (like Inspector Japp and Captain Hastings) believes that Cust's clerkly insecurity is motive enough for a series of calculated and violent murders, derived from Cust's three pretentious names. Poirot, however, does not buy into this account, he believes that the opposite psychological stance is behind the murderer's agitation – the desire for attention to be paid was a cover for the crime that had to be the metaphorical needle in a haystack.

In Poirot's final *dénouement*, he argues that Cust cannot be the murderer because his personality does not fit that which would be required. One such point made in Cust's favour is that pretty young flirt, Betty Barnard, would not walk at night along a beach with a man like

Cust: this requires, as Poirot states, “*le sex appeal*” (208). Cust, then, is clearly a clerk-type, who is a re-formation of characteristic traits: he is middle-aged, bland, innocuous, ridiculous, and sexually inanimate. As one witness describes him, Cust “wasn’t the sort of man you’d notice” (135). Just as Prufrock was Eliot’s lost clerk, and Septimus Smith represented the thousands of veteran clerks in Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*, Cust is Christie’s war clerk. He is representative of the “army of clerks” that won victory, as Ernest Hodder put it, “[over] the greatest and most wonderfully equipped army the world has ever known”, and who returned, after securing this success to a life of mediocrity (28).

The ABC Murders, then, offers the reader a glimpse into a deeper and more complex clerkly subculture. Christie offers three clerks who, each in turn, are accused of murder and examined accordingly. From the last person to see the victim alive (whom generic convention tells us is immediately a person of suspicion), to the boyfriend of a victim (again, a classic culprit), to the extravagantly-named and mildly-psychotic veteran, the clerk in his many guises is deconstructed and finally identified as innocent. In doing so, she self-consciously plays with the three identifiable tropes outlined earlier in this article; Mr Partridge is a “nobody”, Donald is our potentially corrupt clerk (sullied in this instance by jealousy rather than greed), and Cust is our shadowy figure hidden within the crowd. With the exception of Mr Partridge, who as a fleeting character is ill-qualified for empathy, the clerks are deconstructed by Poirot and thus understood to be victims of their own lack of self-confidence. Indeed, Poirot’s suggestion at the end that Cust might sell his story to a number of newspapers because he is “practically the most famous man in England today” (212), reinforces the notion of a clerical class so desirous of recognition. Far from the “nobody” that Cust purported to be, in this instance, Christie allows the “nondescript” figure who is “hardly looked at” (135) the limelight that he so desires.

Conclusion

Classist is a term directed at Christie by Mariana Valverde, and in the light of the discussion within this article of the place of the clerk, perhaps it would seem natural that this criticism is a valid one (87). Yet, this article is not attempting to add another reason to the apparently

plentiful list that exists on why not to study writers like Christie. Nor does it argue that Christie's works can simply be read as a social history of repeated attitudes towards clerks, or that Christie's attitudes towards the lower middle classes are problematic at best and classist at worst. Rather, what is of note is twofold: first, that Christie demonstrates a series of associations between the lower middle classes and an almost caricatured form of representation, which evolved across the Victorian period, and lasts until the present day. In this reading, Christie's work is offered as evidence of the power of the clerkly caricature, not because she is the creator of it but because as a female, middle-class author she has absorbed the conventions of writing the clerk and reproduced a culturally-composed likeness. Second, however, is the idea that Christie attempts to reform the clerical identity; that by placing the clerk within the narrative as a potential murderer – particularly through the use of two key characters in *The ABC Murders* – Christie allows Poirot to interpret the clerk's formulaic inarticulateness, allowing space for a more nuanced depiction of his psyche. Revisiting her other clerks in the light of Donald Fraser and Alexander Bonaparte Cust, the reader is aware of the empathy demonstrated towards these characters, not only by Poirot, but by the female characters who support them.

Christie's position as a writer of middlebrow fiction, aimed at audiences composed of the clerkly types that she was caricaturing, is suggestive that this revisioning was not met with acrimony. High modernism's criticisms of the urban automaton are often contextualised, and readily understood even now, but Christie's treatment of her clerks helps us to comprehend the paradox inherent in a middlebrow audience that was content to read caricatured impressions of itself. The clerkly reader, then, can appreciate Christie's Fraser, Cust, Gregory Banks or George Abernethie, not only as an escapist symbol of his own dark and latent desires, but as a figure who is complex and three-dimensional, and who is receiving recognition of his status within contemporary urban and suburban society.

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¹ See Rita Felski, "Nothing to Declare: Identity, Shame, and the Lower Middle Class," *PMLA* 115 (Jan. 2001), 33-45; Arno Mayer, "The Lower Middle Class as Historical Problem," *Journal of Modern History* 47 (Sept. 1975), 409-436; Peter Bailey, "White Collars, Grey Lives? The Lower Middle Class Revisited," *Journal of British Studies* 38 (July 1999), 273-290.

² Clerks were, for instance, the vocational group listed as the principal users of the City of Westminster's libraries in 1905 as Philip Waller suggests in *Writers, Readers and Reputations: Literary Life in Britain 1870-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 52. See also Leah Price and Pamela Thurschwell, *Literary Secretaries/Secretarial Cultures* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

³ Indeed, within Poirot's own household we have an example of clerical mechanisation embodied in Miss Lemon, his efficient secretary. Secretaries, rather than male clerks, are, however, a subject for a further article.

⁴ For further discussion of the stereotypical clerk's form see A. James Hammerton, "Pooterism or Partnership? Marriage and Masculine Identity in the Lower Middle Class, 1870-1920," *Journal of British Studies* 38 (July 1999), 291-321; Jonathan Rose, "What was Leonard Bast really like?" in *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (London: Yale University Press, 2001).

⁵ Part of this fear seems to be located in the nature of record-keeping; if financial integrity is fixed by legal documentation, the clerk, whose proximity to and responsibility for paperwork means that he is best placed to doctor the written record. As a letter to the Editor in *The Times* argues, "If an Englishman can't trust his ledger, then what can he trust?" "Another of those monstrous frauds", *The Times* (26 Apr. 1860) *The Times Digital Archive*, accessed 2 Dec. 2014.

⁶ The most famous of these examples is, of course, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), but doctor-murderers also feature in *Cards on the Table* (1936), *And Then There Were None* (1939), *4.50 from Paddington* (1957), and *Sleeping Murder* (1976).

⁷ See, for example, *Third Girl* (1966) or *Peril at End House* (1932). In the latter, the pettiness of the motive and the intricacies of the concealment are an inversion of our expectations of the heroine, both in that she could commit the crime, and that she could attempt to trick Hercule Poirot for the reason that is lowest in our moral hierarchy of motives. There are instances where the murderer feels they truly 'need' money but these tend to involve hysterical murderers – usually women – with a particular (and 'higher') purpose: Miss Gilchrist in *After the Funeral* (1953) and Bella in *Dumb Witness* (1937) fit this category.

⁸ Note, the mirroring of P. L. Travers' Mr Banks - another stereotyped clerk.

⁹ See, for example, the solicitor's clerk (a "little ginger-haired man" (260)) to whom poor Edward Malone, of Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* (1912), loses the fair Gladys, or Victor Canning's eponymous clerk Mr Finchley, who is described as "forty-five, short" (7).

¹⁰ There is another "clerkly" figure the reader meets before this, but the chapter is formed away from the narrative of Captain Hastings.

¹¹ Poirot later draws attention to this automaton-like status by asking Donald if he saw anything on the night of the murder, remarking: "the eye notices mechanically – unintelligently, but accurately" (113).

¹² As Prufrock puts it:

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
Am an attendant lord, one that will do
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
Deferential, glad to be of use,
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous –
Almost, at times, the Fool (Eliot 82).